

Address by USAID/Namibia representative, Monica Koep, Senior Technical Advisor for Democracy and Governance, to the Namibia Institute for Democracy (NID) Symposium, 16<sup>th</sup> August, 2007, Alte BrueckeResort, Swakopmund

Honorable Speaker, Dr Theo-Ben Gurirab, Mr. Theunis Keulder, Director of NID (Consult), Ms Naitah Hishoona, Civil Society Coordinator for NID, Mr. Moses Ndjarakana, Executive Director of the Namibia Democracy Support Centre, representatives of donor organizations, Namibian NGOs and community-based organizations, members of the media, ladies and gentleman.

It is my distinct pleasure and honour to be able to address you here today, on behalf of USAID/Namibia and U.S. Charge d' Affaires Eric Benjaminson, who is, unfortunately, unable to attend, but who sends his greetings and best wishes for a successful conference.

During his speech at the Opening of the Namibian parliament earlier this year, President Hifikepunye Pohamba stated the following:

*“The consolidation of democracy and the strengthening of our legislative institutions is in our own hands as Namibians. We hold the key to unlock the countless possibilities of building a vibrant society and a strong constitutional democratic order. This can be achieved by increasing the participation of all our citizens in the process of governance and law-making at all levels. We can achieve this by strengthening institutions and structures that facilitate the participation of our people in the legislative process. Among these are outreach programmes by the legislature. I believe that our outreach efforts should not be limited to electoral campaigns. Rather, they must be continuous in order to sensitize our people about the roles they can play in building a better society.”*

In essence, the Democracy and Governance program we've been working on with you is about Parliament, People and Participation. It focuses on supporting those Namibian institutions and organizations that aim at increasing the frequency of the interaction between Namibians and their elected representatives, increasing the number and range of participants, and improving the tone of dialogue on political issues and the quality of debate around policy. This supports the notion expressed by President Pohamba that interaction between the Namibian citizenry and its elected leaders is crucial in the process of addressing key development challenges faced by the country. If Citizens have a voice, are able to articulate their concerns, and are heard by their elected representatives, they are then empowered to share the responsibility for finding appropriate, local responses to their problems. They are also encouraged to become involved in implementing those solutions and planning to prevent the recurrence of such problems.

For the last twelve years, USAID has worked with the leadership of Parliament, one of Namibia's key democratic institutions, supporting both the National Assembly and Council

in establishing the structures, systems and procedures that enable MPs and staff to carry out their crucial functions of legislation, representation and oversight. Overall, the emphasis has been on strengthening the interface between parliament and the citizenry, both through formal opportunities such as public hearings on pending legislation, but also through what President Pohamba referred to as the “outreach programmes by the legislature”. The programmes include visits by parliamentary leadership, MPs and staff to various regions to introduce parliament to the people and to meet with community members in school and church halls, in regional council offices and under trees, if need be, to hear their concerns. These issues are then collated and channeled to the relevant ministries for response and action.

At the same time, USAID has provided assistance to organizations such as the NID, the Namibia Democracy Support Centre, the Namibian Community Radio Network and the Namibian Media Women’s Association, organizations that work across the country with community-based civic groups that want to make use of the opportunity provided through the parliamentary outreach visits. Through advocacy training and institutional support those organizations that seek to mobilize around local interests, want to raise matters of concern and address issues of regional importance are equipped, empowered and encouraged to do so.

This training and networking workshop is part of this assistance effort. It offers a suitable platform for the exchange of experiences, discussions on challenges, the sharing of lessons learned and strategic advice. Given the range of participants and representatives of key organizations and institutions, it also provides the ideal opportunity for cementing existing relationships, building bridges and forging new alliances, not only between civil society players, but also between civic groups and political office bearers, at local, regional and national level. This is exactly in line with President Pohamba’s exhortation to “unlock the countless possibilities of building a vibrant society and a strong constitutional democratic order”.

Therefore, USAID/Namibia is proud to be associated with this event and congratulates the NID for having organized the program activities. Special thanks are due to Theunis Keulder and Naitah Hishoona for taking the lead in planning the workshop and dealing with the logistics.

I conclude by wishing you all a productive and stimulating time and hope that you will leave here on Friday afternoon with a notebook full of useful information, relevant suggestions, interesting plans, many innovative ideas.....a number of important new contacts.....and a few good friends.

Thank you.

Monica Koep, Senior Technical Advisor for Democracy and Governance (USAID/Namibia)

